

Floor remarks of Sen. Bill Nelson

March 24, 2010

For the first time, we as a nation are recognizing that people have a right to not be destroyed by sickness.

Under the Senate bill passed by the House and signed into law by the president - folks will no longer have to choose between their health and their pocketbooks.

Parents will no longer have to worry about whether they can afford to get their kids to the doctor.

Seniors won't have to wonder if Medicare will still be there for them several years down the road.

Health-care reform doesn't mean people won't have to continue to take responsibility for themselves and their families.

The bill we passed – and the even the one we're now debating - improves health-care affordability and access for all. But it still requires that folks do their part.

Families that can afford to, will be asked to contribute to the cost of their coverage. And people are expected to get regular primary care – so that they don't end up in the emergency room with something that could've been treated easily and cheaply had it been addressed sooner.

But very, very importantly, we're also going to hold the insurance companies accountable.

We're finally telling them – you can't drop someone just because they get sick. You can't cap someone's benefits because you're tired of paying for their care. And you can't decide not to offer someone coverage because they have a preexisting condition.

We're telling them: no more; no more; no more.

We're also saying to our seniors – we as a nation remain unwavering in our commitment to protect and preserve Medicare for today, tomorrow and the next millennium.

You know, there's been an awful lot of misinformation going around about something called Medicare advantage.

Fact is, the original Senate bill proposed an unfair way to fix overpayments to these private Medicare plans.

The fix would have come at the expense of seniors living in areas with high medical costs, like my state of Florida. I got an amendment passed in committee that fixed the problem fairly.

Under this reconciliation bill, the president has proposed another way to rein in Medicare advantage companies – one that upon close inspection also treats seniors fairly.

It puts companies on the hook for their performance. If they don't provide quality service, their reimbursements are cut.

I appreciate the president's leadership on this issue and the fact that he heard the concerns expressed by me and a number of other senators including Sens. Schumer and Wyden.

Now having said all this, I also have to say we've left something undone in the Senate bill that's now law – and even in the reconciliation package.

I'm not happy that this legislation lets drug makers pretty much off the hook. You all know that over the past few years I've been voicing the concerns and fears of residents in my state about what's been happening to their drug prices.

I also hear from folks who can't afford their medications when they hit the prescription drug coverage gap known as the doughnut hole. They skimp on food, or split their pills, or stop taking them altogether. And while this bill offers a discount to seniors in the doughnut hole, there's nothing to keep drug companies from continuing to jack up their prices until that discount is meaningless.

I also hear from folks who are frustrated that folks in other countries are getting the very same drugs for much less than we pay here.

Mr. President, I had an amendment that would have required the drug industry to pay a fair share of the tab for health care reform. It required drug manufacturers to give the government price breaks on drugs for a lot of low-income seniors.

This would have saved us an estimated \$106 billion which is more than enough to close the doughnut hole altogether, and then make a dent in offsetting the federal deficit.

I, for one, intend to come back here and revisit this.

Meantime, Mr. President, I want say this reconciliation bill deepens and extends the promise of the health-care reform bill that was signed into law this week.

I stood with the president when he put pen to paper yesterday. I think it's great we've begun the process of health care reform.

It has been said by many folks in many different ways that - we are not put on earth for ourselves, but are placed here for each other."

Well, here we are, and here we are - debating legislation that stands to improve the lives of tens of millions of Americans.

Therefore, despite its flaws, I will vote to pass this legislation.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.